

## Who's Afraid of Female Agency?

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# Who's Afraid of Female Agency?

## A Rejoinder to Gill

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Last year, we published an article in the *European Journal of Women's Studies* (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006), in which we analysed public and feminist debate about girls' clothes, especially the headscarf and the belly button shirt, or crop top. Our project arose out of surprise and irritation about the dichotomy in these debates, which are either exclusively concerned with the meaning of the headscarf as a supposedly problematic marker of girls' submission to Islam and male family members, or entirely with the belly button shirt as a sign of rampant sexuality incited by the forces of popular culture, glossy magazines and video clips. Our starting point was that it is rarely recognized that both discussions centre on girls' bodies and the desire to control them. Both the debate about the headscarf and the concern about the belly button shirt and other forms of what has been called 'porno-chic', identify girls' sartorial choices as problematic because they would signify submission to the external forces of Muslim culture on the one hand or consumer capitalism on the other. After disentangling the various discourses constituting the two debates, we argued that girls' bodies have become the metonymic location for several societal dilemmas, such as decency, feminism, gender equality, multicultural excess and the separation between church and state. Whether one expresses concern about the headscarf, or is worried about the belly button, both discussions share a lack of interest in girls' own voices, which are hardly ever invited, let alone heard.<sup>1</sup> Mainstream journalism, feminist writing and academic publishing have not given girls' understanding of their sartorial choices much attention; the discourses that these texts rely on do not allow for an understanding of girls as subjects worth listening

to, confined as they supposedly are in the hegemonic frames of Islam or capitalism. Why listen to someone with a false consciousness, in other words. Our second intention with the article (and the research project it is part of) was therefore to counter such denial of voice and agency, and insert girls' voices into the debate. A first look at their own discussions, as could be found easily on the Internet, provided a completely opposite understanding of their clothing decisions. Girls see those as individual judgements denying all influence from the outside world. We argued that such claims are 'overly simplistic and ignore the various societal pressures' that bear on girls (p. 113). Yet, as we wrote, that does not mean that their choices or claims should be discredited in advance. We proposed, in conclusion, to understand girls' clothing, and especially the controversial choices that elicit public debate and concern, as speech acts that should be part of the discussions: 'as contributions to "deliberation", subject to debate and confrontation between actors taken equally seriously' (p. 115). Such a perspective has been common in discussions of controversial boys' clothing, especially Lonsdale gear, which has been appropriated by the extreme right.<sup>2</sup> Proposals to ban such wear have all been countered with claims to freedom of speech, therewith defining boys' clothing as independent speech acts. Yet, in our analysis of the various debates around girls' clothes we could not find freedom of speech as an argument used to refrain from intervention.

Our article elicited a critical reply from Rosalind Gill (2007) of the LSE Gender Institute in London. Gill appreciates our intervention for two reasons: 'highlighting the double standards in the ways girls' and boys' clothing choices are understood, and in exploring how the female body is the site of anxieties and contestation about multiculturalism and feminism' (p. 79). Yet, she has strong doubts about treating the phenomena of the headscarves and porno-chic as analytically similar, and forcefully criticizes our desire to first understand girls' sartorial choices as they themselves give meaning to them, before thinking of them as the inevitable result of cultural and economic powers. Gill argues that our call for 'respect' of girls' own discourse 'remains trapped in precisely the individualizing, neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique' (p. 72). She claims that we do not provide a sense of cultural contexts in which girls make their clothing choices, and that, as a result, girls appear in our analysis as socially and culturally dislocated. 'In the desire to respect girls' choices, any notion of cultural influence seems to have been evacuated entirely' (p. 73). And finally, in strongly rhetorical language, Gill wonders: 'Why is acknowledging cultural influence deemed so shameful? Conversely, why are autonomous choices so fetishized?' (p. 73). The remainder of her article is then dedicated to her own research about the 'midriff' generation in Britain, a generation of young women complying to porno-chic and 'expected to live up to ever narrower judgements of

female attractiveness and to meet standards of physical perfection that . . . only a mannequin could achieve' (p. 74).

Our initial article was meant as an intervention in both mainstream and feminist debate, and a critical response like Gill's is therefore more than welcome, in fact it was exactly what the article was aimed at. Nevertheless, Gill's response is disappointing for two reasons, which we elaborate in the remainder of this article. First, by presenting her own work on porno-chic as the illuminating example of how feminist research on clothing styles should be carried out, Gill falls back into one of the key problems we identified in our article, namely that of separating analysis about porno-chic from examinations of the headscarf. As a result, her response suffers from internal inconsistencies that are unhelpful to understanding the issues at hand, as we show later. Second, in putting us up as naive neoliberals mutely supporting (Gill uses all these terms to qualify our work) a false discourse of free choice and individual autonomy, Gill seriously misreads our argument. In fact, Gill created such a caricature of our analysis, that one is forced to think about the purpose that it serves. Why is the sheer thought of girls' agency so problematic that it needs to be discharged before it has been analysed? What makes agency such a problematic word in Gill's feminism?

## HEADSCARVES AND PORNO-CHIC

There are several reasons to treat the discussions about girls wearing headscarves and girls wearing belly button shirts in one analytic framework. Radical feminist thought of the 1970s, for instance, would have argued that both types of clothing are an expression of the patriarchal oppression of women's bodies (as subjected to the rules of Islam and consumer capitalism respectively). Without reverting to such theorizing, it is obvious that both styles are obsessed with girls' bodies and sexuality: Muslim styles aiming to protect girls' bodies from the public eye, consumer capitalist styles seeking to expose them to the public eye. The styles are so much the mirror of each other that they are regularly and explicitly advocated as critique on each other. As the father of a girl who got expelled for wearing the headscarf said: 'You show your boobs, butt and belly button. That is your freedom. Give us the freedom to cover something up' (quoted in Koelewijn, 2003). Similarly, after the Dutch government announced a legal ban on wearing the *burka*<sup>3</sup> in public, the Malaysian government issued a strong reaction expressing its surprise that people in the Netherlands are allowed to go about naked or scarcely dressed, but not to cover themselves up.

Nevertheless, Gill has serious problems with our treatment of the headscarf and porno-chic as phenomena similarly obsessed with girls'

bodies and sexuality. It is unclear, however, what exactly her problem is. She sees our identification of similarities as a potential case of 'insensitive western feminism' (p. 70), which ignores the post-9/11 Islamophobia that has been projected onto women wearing a headscarf. According to Gill, Muslim girls suffer much more violence and abuse because of their clothing than girls exposing their midriffs and cleavages. Yet, on the other hand, Gill contends that our analysis might also be read as something 'wickedly subversive' (p. 71), submitting mainstream clothing to the same scrutiny as headscarves. The trouble Gill has in deciding how to understand our analysis, as insensitive or subversive, arises exactly from taking headscarves and belly buttons as separate phenomena. Only then, it is possible to claim, as Gill does, that Muslim girls wearing headscarves suffer much more abuse than midriff girls. Apart from the question whether this assertion is empirically justified, we are not particularly fond of assuming such a hierarchy of oppressions. In general, such hierarchies obscure the oppressions women share, and in this specific case, it conceals that Muslim and midriff girls are both subjected to discourses that define their bodies and sexualities as not of their own, but as problems that need to be controlled and exploited. However different these discourses are (in our article we distinguished decency, feminism, gender equality, multicultural excess and the separation between church and state), they share a common approach to girls and their bodies as entities that can be objectified, classified and disciplined, and that do not need listening to. Such silencing of girls is unacceptable, whether it comes from capitalism, Islam, Christianity or feminism in the variety that Gill supports.

Separating the headscarf from the belly button shirt also leads to analytical and empirical blindness, as Gill's analysis of midriff culture demonstrates. Notwithstanding Gill's identification of Muslim girls as suffering the most abuse for their style, her own analysis focuses exclusively on the much more mundane and (according to Gill) less dangerous practice of porno-chic. She labels it as 'virtually hegemonic' and 'almost mandatory-wear' (p. 71) and wonders why 'the look [young women] achieve . . . is so similar' (p. 73). Yet, one only sees such a lack of diversity if one ignores girls who do not conform to this style. If Gill would include the headscarf in her analysis, she would have recognized diversity in young women's dress choices. She would also have been able to identify similar marketing forces and prescriptions from the Islamic fashion industry, as we referred to in our article, on the basis of the work of – among others – Kiliçbay and Binark (2002). By separating the headscarf from porno-chic, Gill suggests that wearing a headscarf is exempt from such capitalist and 'western' practices as commercialism or peer pressure, not only ignoring, but also firmly 'Othering' headscarf girls as a result.

## WHO'S AFRAID OF AGENCY?

Gill's main point of criticism is on our frequent mobilization of the terms 'agency', 'autonomy' and 'choice' in our analysis of girls' clothing. She doubts whether these terms *analytically* do justice to girls' lived experience and whether they allow a feminist *politics* that can escape the traps of the neoliberal paradigm. Admittedly, we have not been very explicit about the way we understand these three concepts, but in the practice of our writing we have limited the usage of the word 'choice' to the mundane decisions girls make every day about what to put on. This is a rather nominal usage of the word 'choice', not meant to refer to any kind of philosophy or theory about (the lack of) free will. We applied the concept of 'autonomy' to refer to the understanding of free will that is paramount in popular discourse about femininity, and in girls' own accounts of their sartorial decisions, for instance: 'an assumption of individual autonomy also frames girls' talk about porno-chic' (p. 112). Our treatment of the concept of 'agency' has, however, not been very thorough and might have enabled the kind of confusion Gill seems caught up in. Let us therefore be very precise about what we mean by 'agency' in this particular context. We use agency as an analytical term that refers to the purposeful actions of individuals, leaving aside the question whether these actions are autonomously arrived at, or are results of structural forces. This particular understanding is close to Giddens's (1984) by now classic theory of structuration, which states that human action is mutually and circularly shaped by structure and agency alike, and which does not give precedence to the one or the other.

We do not seem to differ very much from Gill's own understandings in this respect, for her rather extensive lesson in her comment on how to understand the particular articulation of structure and agency in the accounts of female freelance new media workers is analytically similar to the extensive work one of us has done on women in journalism, already from the late 1980s onwards (see van Zoonen, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998a, 1998b). The issue arising from that work, and from our desire to understand the style experiences and decisions of girls in contemporary multicultural Europe, is how and which particular structures interact with these decisions. We, as scholars, can 'choose' to identify these ourselves on the basis of our theoretical and political perspective. This is the road Gill takes when she (questionably) contends that 'young women are under greater pressure than ever before' (p. 74) and suggests that it is no wonder that women's accounts are dominated by the language of free choice, because this is the way neoliberal culture generally, and advertisers in particular, approach young consumers (p. 76).

Although Gill does not deny that she herself is as much a victim of the hypodermic media needle as the girls she writes about, she does preserve for herself the capacity of reflexivity in a rather odd confession about her

own clothing choices, which start off resisting fashion trends but end up complying nevertheless. We could engage in this crude rendition of media influence by offering our own experience, which is rooted in a physical impossibility (being tall and somewhat overweight), to comply easily with the fashion trends imposed by consumer capitalism. Yet, that would end up in a fairly tedious piece of navel gazing instead of asking the more relevant question as to why Gill considers her own reflections on her clothing choices as worthy of publication and reading, while she considers those of girls themselves, the centrepieces of the debate, as problematic? Surprisingly maybe to scholars like Gill, we found exactly her type of reflexivity in a series of focus groups one of us did with girls about the way they use and interpret the female celebrity narratives offered by MTV (Duits and van Romondt Vis, 2006). When asked which type of appearance promotes success, they argued against the beauty ideal, yet were aware of how celebrities 'manipulate' their appearance to comply with impossible standards. For instance, in talking about pop singer Pink they reflected on how she changed her image under pressure of the music industry. The focus groups testified to an understanding of how commercial culture and media stories work and how girls themselves are hailed by MTV's celebrity discourse. If the task of the feminist intellectual, as Gill suggests, is not to say 'I see' after such reflections, but to contextualize, situate and locate it in a wider context, look at patterns and variability, examine silences and exclusions (p. 77), then this is exactly what the girls were already doing themselves. This is not to suggest that all girls are feminist theorists in disguise, although they are remarkably media savvy, but that it is imperative to examine which tactics girls use in their everyday lives to 'make do' (de Certeau, 1984) with all the forces that bear on them. Such analysis can only take place by interviewing and observing girls in their own everyday surroundings, and not by framing them from the remote shores of the kind of feminism that Gill advocates.

Given that our analytical position is thus not very different from Gill's, with all of us interested in the particular articulations of girls' everyday (clothing) experience with structural constraints, the question remains why Gill's misreading and misrepresentation of our argument has occurred. We speculate, in conclusion, that this has to do with different ideas about feminist *politics* and particularly with the question of respect.

## FEMINIST POLITICS AND RESPECT

We advocate listening to girls and understanding their choices as they themselves frame them, before articulating them with wider social forces. Gill contends that this intention ignores the theoretical insights of



post-structuralism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis. 'Covertly', she writes, 'it reinstates precisely the model of the rational, deliberative, unified self that this work – much of it in women's studies – sought to interrogate' (p. 76). Leaving aside the fact that this is another distortion of our position, we wonder what kind of politics these theoretical perspectives produce. This is a problem that has been happily ignored in much of the feminist theory that Gill propagates. Questioning the disciplinary mechanisms of the discourses of rationality, deliberation and the unified self has been extremely relevant, but has paralysed the mundane and practical contributions of feminist scholarship to concrete movements for change. Putting it deliberately provocatively, the understanding of a decentred female subject (for that matter, men's selves have much less been deconstructed by feminist theory) ties in comfortably with the stereotypes that have enabled the dismissal of women as politically relevant actors; for they are supposed to be emotional (not rational), unreasonable (not deliberative) and unstable (no unified self). Gill's feminism thus collaborates with mainstream patriarchal forces to silence women and girls, decentred and multifaceted as they are.

This is not to dismiss, let alone contradict, the relevance of feminist contributions to widen understandings of politics, as also articulated with the personal and the emotional. The political lesson feminism has taught us is to listen to and include other voices than those framed in the styles of rational deliberation (e.g. van Zoonen, 2005). Yet when it comes to girls, that is exactly what the sort of feminism Gill adheres to is not doing. Our proposal to understand girls' clothing, especially the garment that has become part of public debate, as speech acts that contribute to societal debate, is part of a long tradition in feminist politics, which has used fashion and particularly anti-fashion to make statements about femininity and the position of women. We also do not argue to understand girls' contemporary clothing choices simply on a par with the feminist anti-fashion of the 1970s, although even without listening to headscarf girls themselves, it seems perfectly predictable that some of them wear their scarf as political statement or protest. Our claim was simply to discard all the top-down discourses about girls' clothing and start asking *them* what they mean by it, making them actors rather than objects in the debate.

In a practically funny qualification, Gill assumes that this particular ambition may have something to do with a supposedly *Dutch* feminist obsession with 'respect': she refers to the work of Joke Hermes and Kathy Davis, who in their research have also prioritized listening to women's own accounts of their experiences with, correspondingly, reading women's magazines and cosmetic surgery. '[I]t would appear that "respect" has emerged as a key term in the vocabulary of Dutch feminist research in recent years' (Gill, 2007: 76). However much we would like to place a Dutch feminist claim to academic fame, the use of 'respect' as a political and philosophical



concept is, of course, neither exclusive nor particular to Dutch feminism. In fact, we ourselves have not even used the term in our article, although our arguing does concur with authors such as German Axel Honneth (1996) and American Richard Sennett (2003). Honneth considers *Anerkennung* (translated into English as 'recognition') to be the main moral resource of our times, unequally distributed and at the heart of many a political struggle. Sennett makes a similar case when he writes that 'lack of respect . . . consists of not being seen, not being accounted as full human beings' (Sennett, 2003: 13). Both Sennett and Honneth assert that breaking the boundaries of inequality is impossible without mutual respect.<sup>4</sup>

If the differences between Gill and us can thus not be attributed to different national traditions of feminism (we dare not argue that English feminist scholarship is currently obsessed with neoliberalism), what does explain our dispute? Might it have something to do with a generational difference? We presented our 'Headscarves and Porno-Chic' paper on which the article is based at a number of conferences, where it was met with agitated responses. Mostly older feminists questioned the possibility of headscarf and porno-chic girls being aware of the particular choices they made, very much in line with Gill's reasoning. These discussions reminded us of the excessively harsh critiques *girl power* has received (e.g. Durham, 2003; McRobbie, 2004). With one of us having hardly outgrown girlhood and the other being an 'older' feminist,<sup>5</sup> we recognize at least some of the problems with respect between generations in our own disagreements, especially when it comes to experience of inequalities, but also in relation to the judgement of midriff styles. Much has been written about these generational conflicts in feminism (e.g. Henry, 2004; Hoogland et al., 2004), and it is not necessary to repeat these analyses extensively. Yet, the core irritation of the younger generations has been the denial of their agency, which seriously conflicts with their self-image of being 'a new, robust young woman with agency and a strong sense of self' (Aapola et al., 2005: 39; see Kelly, 2005 for more). Gill denies such self-images and only accepts subjectivity as a product of power when saying that 'power works in and through subjects, not in terms of crude manipulation, but by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity' (p. 76). That is a rather suffocating analysis that pre-empts all possibility of change. Without taking a position in this debate – we ourselves tend in different directions – the inevitable question is nevertheless: what does feminism gain – politically and analytically – by immediately countering any girl's or woman's appeal to autonomy by pointing out her false consciousness and putting her under all the constraints of patriarchy and capitalism? In the case of the headscarf and belly button girls, this is exactly what the rest of society is doing already, as we extensively demonstrated in our initial article, and feminist scholarship should not comply with these forces of silence.

## NOTES

1. Notable exceptions exist for headscarf girls, for instance the work of Nilüfer Göle (1996) on veiling and Bouw et al. (2003) on the choices of Dutch-Moroccan girls.
2. The middle letters of Lonsdale form the almost complete acronym of the Nazi Party, NSDA(P).
3. In Dutch public discourse the *burka* has got mixed up with the *nikaab*. A *burka* is a type of dress, mostly worn in Afghanistan, that covers the complete body and face. The Dutch discussion is actually about the face-covering veil traditionally worn in Arab countries and by Arab migrants, which is called *nikaab*.
4. But see Fraser and Honneth (2003) for an extensive confrontation about the relation between moral and economic inequalities, and for the articulation of 'recognition' with key issues of feminism.
5. Duits (born 1976), van Zoonen (born 1959). Of course one can be an 'old' feminist at a young age and the other way around.

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